

# The Rhode Island Colony

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**Children's Press®**

An Imprint of Scholastic Inc.

New York Toronto London Auckland Sydney

Mexico City New Delhi Hong Kong

Danbury, Connecticut



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A husking bee



# Timeline of Rhode Island Colony History

**Around 8,000 years ago**



**Native Americans settle Rhode Island and the surrounding areas.**



**1636**



**Roger Williams starts the colony of Providence.**



**1647**



**The General Assembly of Providence Plantations is formed.**



**1772**



**Protesters set fire to the British ship *Gaspee*.**

**1790**

**Rhode Island becomes a state.**







# First Nation

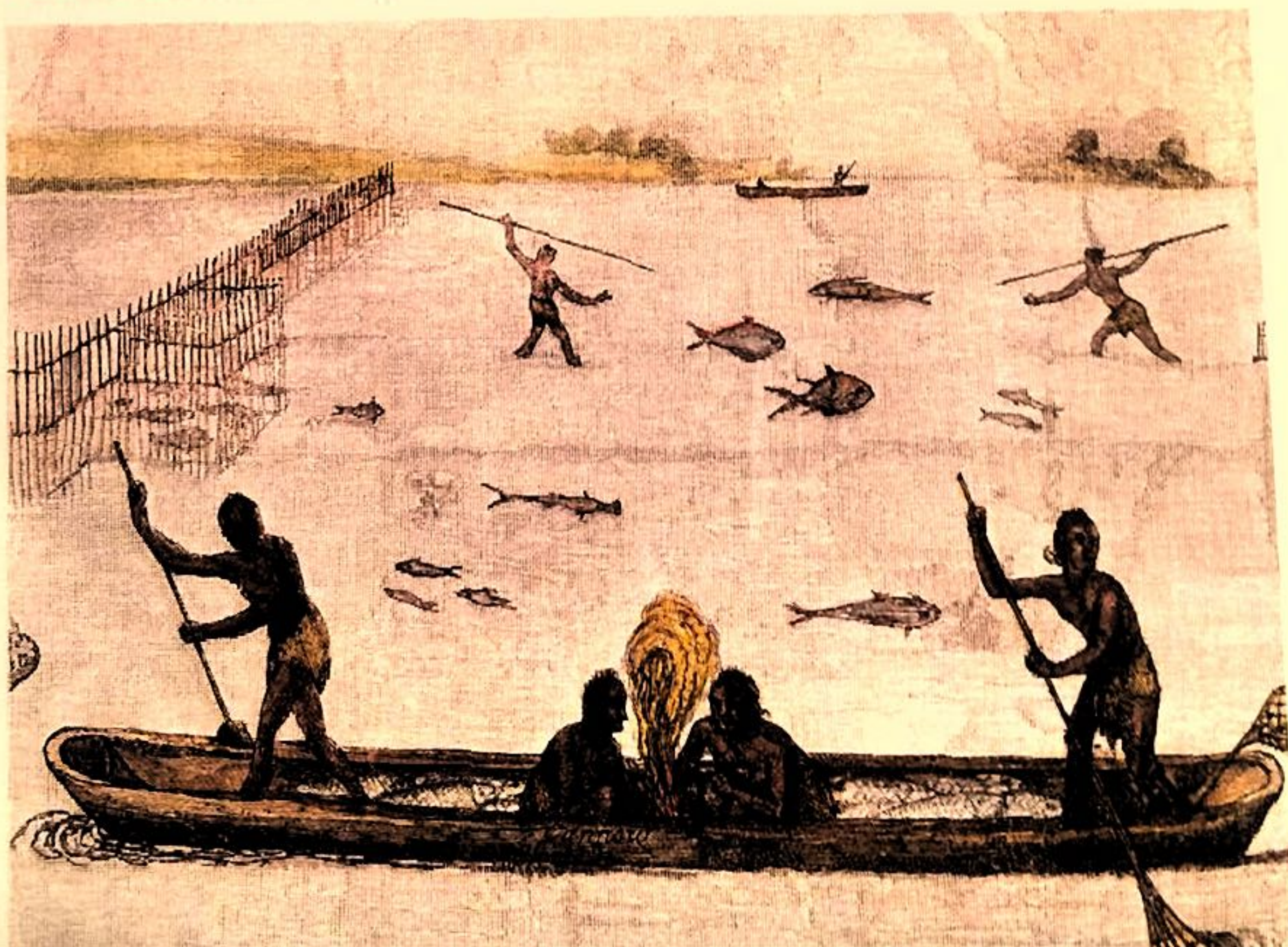
Early Native American groups settled in Rhode Island thousands of years before it was colonized by Europeans. These groups developed into peoples such as the Narragansett, the Pequot, and the Wampanoag. About 7,000 Narragansett lived in the region in 1600. They were the most powerful native group residing there. Their main villages were on the shores or islands of Narragansett Bay. A chief called a sachem was the leader of each village. The Pequot peoples lived to the west. The Wampanoag lived to the east.



## Men at Work

Narragansett men hunted deer, turkey, and beaver with bows and arrows. At the ocean shore they dug oysters and clams out of tide pools. They rowed dugout canoes made of hollowed-out tree trunks to catch fish and eels. Males also had the responsibility of growing tobacco. The Narragansett believed the leafy plant cured headaches and arthritis.

**Native Americans acquired much of their food through fishing.**





Wigwams were used by several native groups in the Northeast.



## Village Women

The Narragansett surrounded their summer villages with fields of maize (corn), squash, and beans. The women tended these small farms. Women and children added to the food supply by gathering berries and other wild plants. Women also made clothing from animal skins and furs. As winter approached, women took down the family's wigwam, a type of movable house. The family moved to a village away from the stormy seashore and built the wigwam again.



# Settlers From Far Away

Local Native Americans met Italian explorer Giovanni da Verrazano when he sailed into Narragansett Bay in 1524. But it wasn't until the 1600s that native peoples had steady contact with Europeans. Dutch traders lived in forts to the west. They traded polished shell beads called wampum to Native Americans for beaver and otter furs. The Narragansett lacked metalworking abilities. They traded for Dutch knives, axes, and other tools.





Williams served  
as a peacemaker  
and a mediator  
between the  
Narragansett  
and colonists.

## Roger Williams

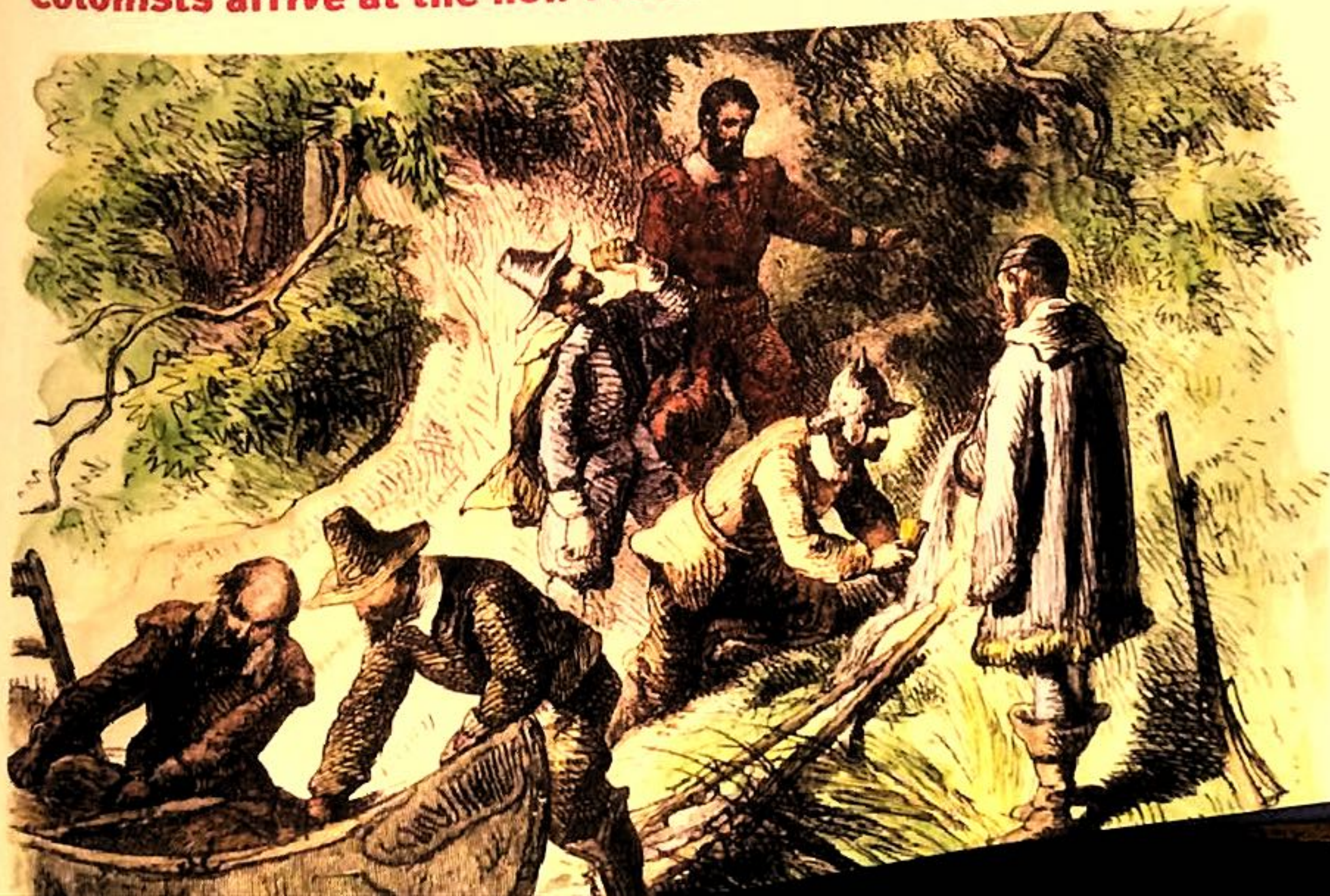
Europeans began to settle on the coast of present-day Massachusetts in the 1620s. Religious thinker Roger Williams was exiled, or forced out, from England's Massachusetts Bay **Colony** in 1636.

Williams had spoken out harshly against the Church of England. He also preached the unpopular ideas of religious freedom and fair treatment of Native Americans. Williams used a gift of land from two Narragansett sachems to start his own colony.



Twelve families joined Williams to found the town of Providence in modern-day Rhode Island. Williams treated his Native American neighbors with respect. He made honest deals with them and learned their languages. He also granted his settlers religious freedom. He encouraged them to speak at town meetings. Rhode Island had four towns by 1642. Each had its own laws. The towns joined together into a single colony when Massachusetts and Connecticut threatened to take their land.

**Colonists arrive at the new Providence settlement.**

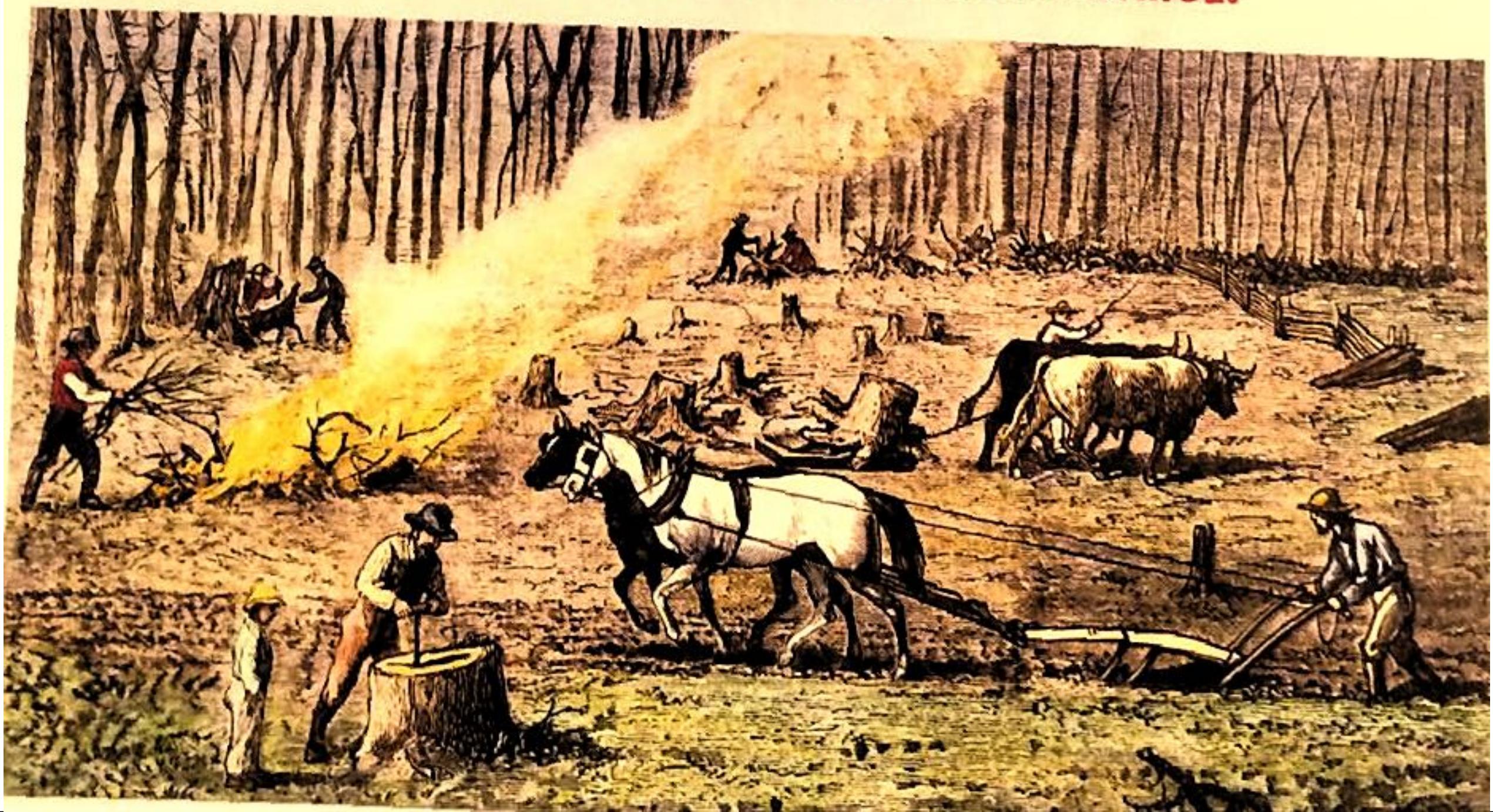




# Providence Plantations

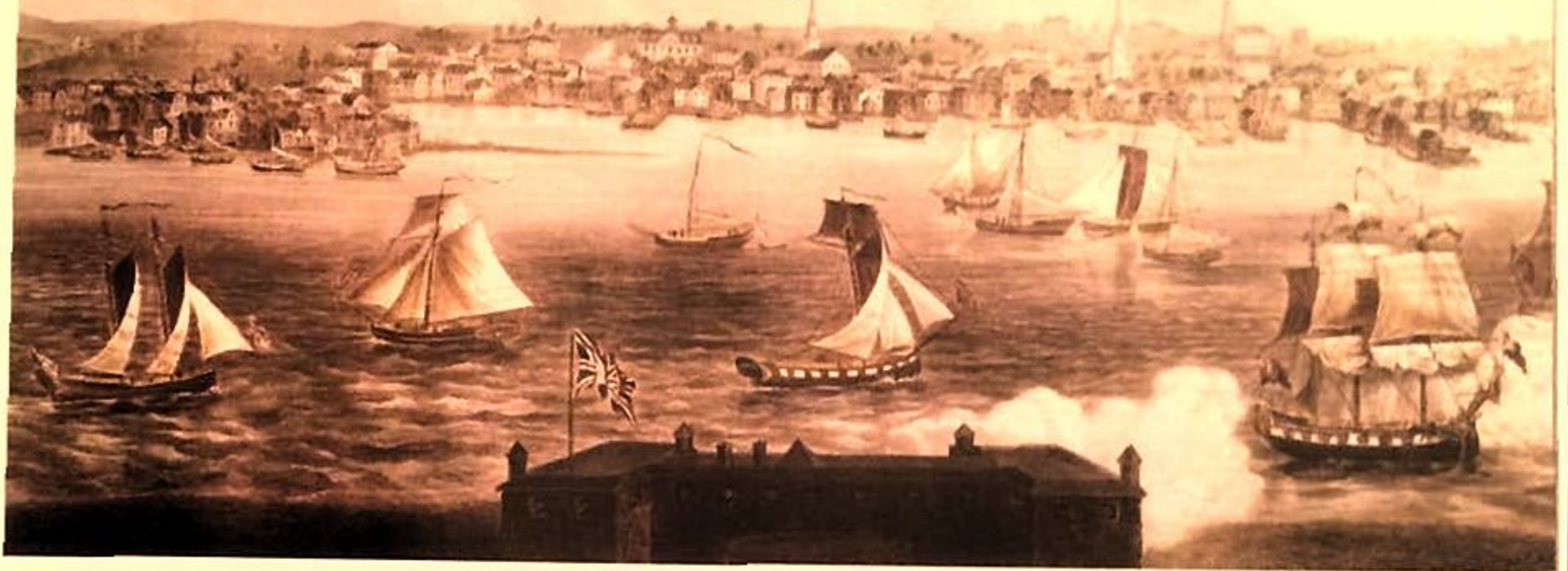
Williams obtained a **charter** from England's King Charles I in 1644. It stated that the colony was independent from others. The colony was named Providence Plantations. It formed a General Assembly to make laws. Religious groups fleeing **prejudice** in England and other colonies came to Providence. Growing and selling crops such as maize and tobacco replaced the fur trade as a way to make a living. The population of the colony reached 1,200 people in 1655.

**Land had to be cleared of trees before it could be farmed.**





Newport was  
founded in 1639.



## A New Charter

A new charter was granted in 1663 to help the colony once again resist its land-grabbing neighbors. The charter changed the colony's name to Rhode Island. It also allowed Rhode Islanders to elect their own governor. This was an unusual freedom in any American colony at that time. The General Assembly set up headquarters in Newport. Newport was a growing port city with a booming **economy** built on shipping, whaling, and trading.



## War With the Narragansett

Massachusetts's native peoples went to war in 1675 to take back land claimed by settlers. The Narragansett refused to join the conflict at first. But in December, armed settlers from outside Rhode Island attacked and killed hundreds of Narragansett in December. The Narragansett burned Providence and Warwick in spring 1676. The colonists responded by killing the Narragansett head sachem. Many Native Americans left Rhode Island when the war ended in August.

**Colonists launch an attack against a Narragansett village.**





By 1774, a third of British merchant ships were built in American colonies.



## A Threat From England

King James II forced the colony to join with the rest of New England under a single government in 1685. The experiment ended three years later. King William III assumed the throne. Rhode Island was again permitted to choose its own government. The colony thrived. Newport silver and iron goods became famous throughout the colonies. So did candles and ships made in Rhode Island. But much of the colony's success relied on less respectable businesses.





Native Americans  
were occasionally  
sold as slaves.




**Smugglers** brought goods into Rhode Island without paying taxes on their cargo. This was a serious crime. Newport also hosted dozens of **privateers**. These pirates were hired by England to harass enemies such as France and Spain. Newport businessmen began to sell African slaves in 1696. Many **merchants** became wealthy in the slave trade. This allowed them to build large houses and buy stylish clothing.





# Life in Rhode Island

Children in Rhode Island often led difficult lives. As many as four in 10 died before reaching adulthood during the 1600s. Children spent most of their time doing chores. Farm children milked cows and chopped firewood. Boys living in town often worked with their fathers at the family business. Girls helped their mothers take care of the household.



Colonial women did most of their cooking in or around a large fireplace.





Boys were more likely to attend school than girls were.



Colonial children attend a dame school in the teacher's home.

## Schooling

Rhode Island children learned reading and writing at home. Only a few towns opened schools. Some women ran “dame schools” from their homes.

These were a type of private elementary school. Few children had a higher education. Many boys left home to serve as **apprentices**. An apprentice spent a number of years with a tradesman who taught him a special skill such as carpentry or metalworking.



## Women at Work

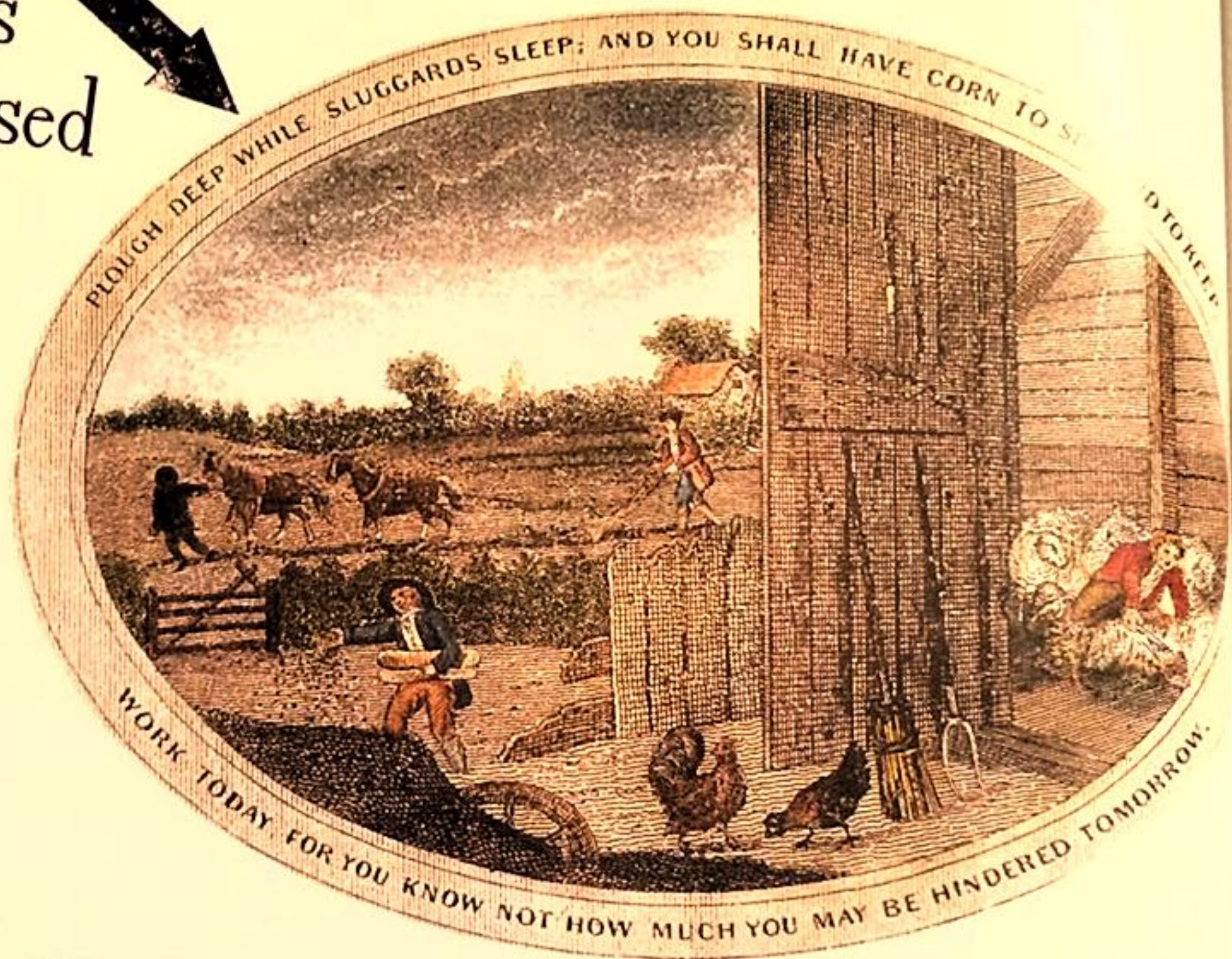
Most women spent their days taking care of their children and cooking. They sewed clothes, spun wool, and kept gardens. Many farm women earned money by making and selling items such as yarn, butter, or medicine. Time with friends was spent at church and social events. Farm families met to husk corn at husking bees. Then they feasted, danced, and played music.

**Colonists used husking bees as a chance to get together with others in the community.**





Colonial Rhode  
Island farmers  
commonly raised  
sheep, apples,  
onions, and  
dairy products.



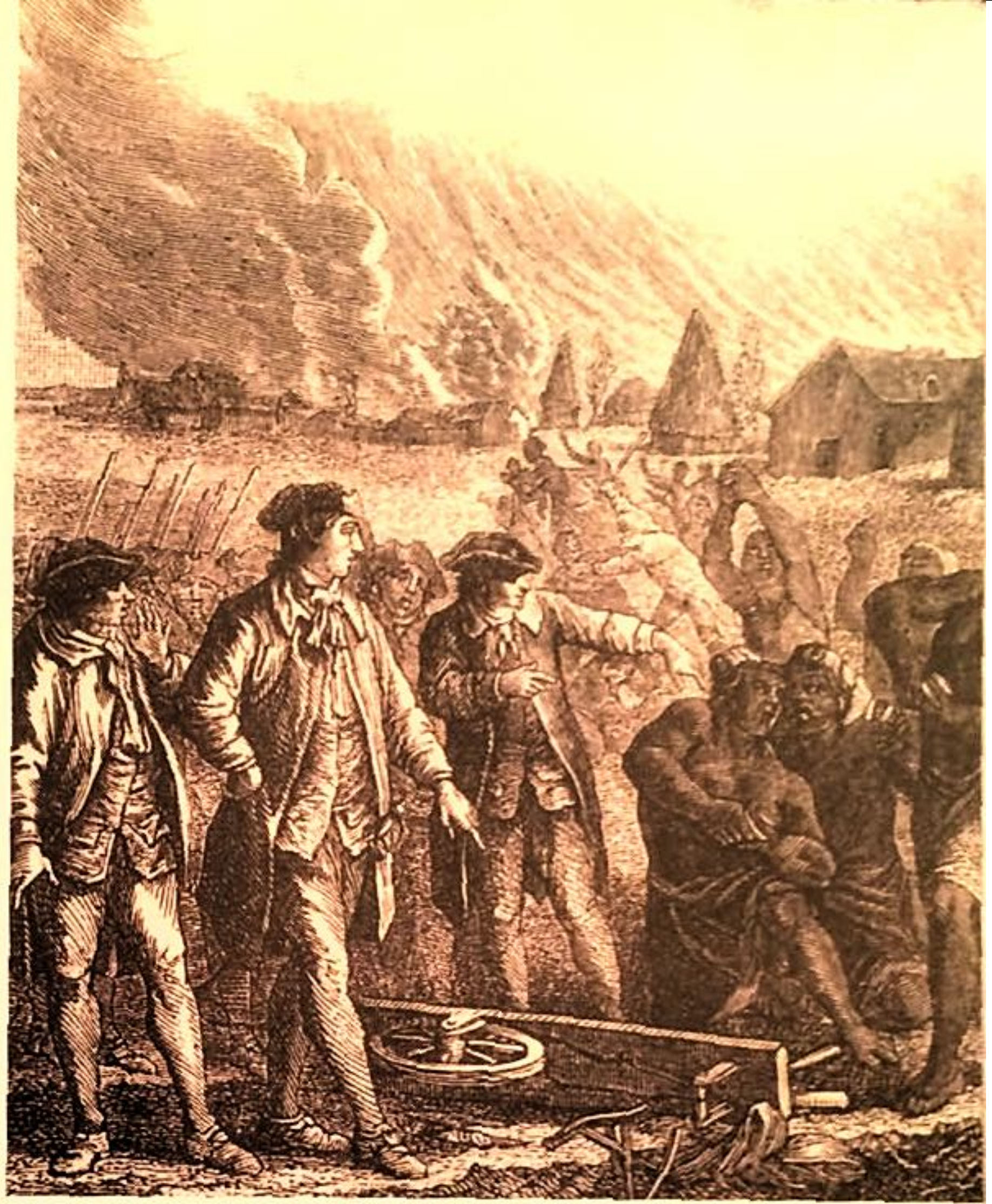
## Earning a Living

Farmers and their older sons plowed and planted the field. They took the crops to sell at local markets. The work started before sunrise and often ended after sunset. Owners of large farms, called plantations, hired other people or bought African slaves to grow the crops. More men went into trades and other businesses as time passed.



# Slaves

Enslaved people had no rights or freedoms. Owners could beat them or sell their family members. Children of slaves were born slaves. Rhode Island merchants played a major role in American slavery. They organized hundreds of slaving trips to Africa to capture slaves. According to some historians, more than 100,000 slaves passed through Newport and other cities before 1774. Rhode Island made it illegal to bring new slaves into the colony that year.



**Slaves had no choices regarding how they lived or worked.**